

FISH and WILDLIFE COMMISSION AGENDA ITEM COVER SHEET

Meeting Date: April 14, 2016

Agenda Item: Aunt Molly Wildlife Management Area Exchange of Use Ten-Year Lease Renewal

Division: Wildlife

Action Needed: Final

Time Needed on Agenda for this Presentation: 5 Min

Background

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) proposes to enter into a 10-year Cooperative Habitat Management Lease Agreement with the Pocha Ranch in Powell County, about 4 miles NNW of Helmville. Under the proposed action the Pocha Ranch would have limited use for wintering livestock and grazing (cattle) or haying of approximately 70 acres of dry-land tame-grass pasture located on FWP's Aunt Molly Wildlife Management Area (AMWMA). In exchange, 53 acres of Blackfoot River riparian habitat on the Pocha Ranch would be managed as part of AMWMA. This parcel would be managed for wildlife habitat and would be open for public hunting and recreational opportunity that is consistent with public use rules on the AMWMA. Additionally, the 53-acre parcel would provide access to an isolated portion of the AMWMA that is currently landlocked or publicly accessible only under Montana's Stream Access Law.

Public Involvement Process & Results

A draft environmental assessment (EA) was prepared for this proposal. The EA was posted on FWP's Internet website <http://fwp.mt.gov> on February 23 and the public comment period closed on March 23, 2016. One public comment—in support—was received as of March 21.

Alternatives and Analysis

No-action is the only practical alternative to this proposed action. If FWP did not enter into this proposed agreement an opportunity to conserve habitat across a larger footprint than the WMA would be lost. Under the no action alternative, FWP would be solely responsible for maintaining an agricultural parcel that would benefit from more intensive management than would be a priority for FWP.

Agency Recommendation & Rationale

FWP recommends that the Commission approve this proposal to enter into a lease with the Pocha Ranch, involving the Aunt Molly WMA. This lease would foster agricultural management on a parcel that would benefit both the private landowner and wildlife, and would allow more cover to grow in riparian areas on private land next to the WMA while also achieving legal public access to a more remote portion of the WMA.

Proposed Motion

I move the Commission approve the cooperative habitat management lease agreement involving Aunt Molly WMA and the Pocha Ranch as proposed by the Department.